DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 894 JC 920 313

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TITLE The Siren Call of a Single Success Measure.
PUB DATE 22 Jun 92
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Summer Institute on Community College Effectiveness and Student Success (4th, Vail, CO, June 21-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; College Outcomes Assessment; *College Transfer Students; Community Colleges; Comparative Analysis; Definitions; Degrees (Academic); Higher Education; *Mathematical Models; *Outcomes of Education; *Research Methodology; Research Needs; *School Effectiveness; Student Educational Objectives; Success; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students
IDENTIFIERS *Transfer Rates (College)

ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that one of the strengths of two-year institutions is their ability to serve the diverse educational needs of their local communities, a single measure of community college effectiveness, the transfer rate, has come to dominate. Because this single measure of success can be used for both internal institutional review, and for public accountability, a major debate concerning how the transfer rate should be calculated has ensued. Two major initiatives, one overseen by the National Effective Transfer Consortium, and the other by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, are underway to develop a nationally accepted definition of a transfer rate. Each of the two projects examines whether the transfer outcome has been achieved for a defined group of students, either those who entered at the same time (entering cohort) or those who left at the same time (exiting cohort). Both studies qualify who is represented in the potential pool of students, require a minimum number of hours of college-level work to be included in the cohort, and reject classifying students by curricular intent. Neither projects' definition should be endorsed in its current form. Instead, the definitions should be modified in the following ways: (1) multiple transfer rates should be considered, with perhaps one primary rate and several secondary measures; (2) the primary rate should be a pure outcomes measure utilizing an exiting cohort; (3) the entering cohort measurement should be considered as a secondary rate; (4) the transfer rate of vocational students should be reported separately; and (5) student intent should be considered only for a secondary rate. (JMC)

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The Siren Call of a Single Success Measure

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4th Annual Summer Institute on
Community College Effectiveness and Student Success
June 21-24, 1992
Vail, Colorado

JC 920 313

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The Siren Call of a Single Success Measure
Vail Conference on Institutional Effectiveness
Richard Fonte
June 22, 1992

It has long been acknowledged that each community college, serves differently, the educational needs of its local community. This diversity is one of the strengths of locally responsive community colleges. It is, however, also the source of confusion over community college effectiveness, in the eyes of the national media, national public policy makers, and the general public.

Community colleges face the challenge of communicating the "successful" educational achievement of students who have come to the community college to meet a number of different objectives. Whether Community colleges have, or do not have, a high percentage of "successful leavers" with outcomes fulfilling their objectives, is an effectiveness question that must be answered.

Those interested in the institutional effectiveness of community colleges, such as members of this consortium, have been attempting to provide a framework for defining student success and institutional effectiveness. This topic is complicated not only because of the lack of agreement over what constitutes "student success" at a community college, but also because of a tendency on the part of many to push for such an agreement by oversimplify the issue.

The Consortium drafted statement, recently adopted by the AACJC, calls for multiple measures of institutional effectiveness, rather than agreeing upon any single measure. Despite this AACJC policy statement, members of the public policy and research community, regularly take actions, either consciously or unconsciously, that advance the primacy of at least one effectiveness measure beyond any other. The potentially dominant measure is, of course, the transfer rate and effectiveness of the transfer mission as the pervasive measure of institutional effectiveness for community colleges.

Today, I would first like to suggest why there is a natural tendency for the transfer rate to be used as a single success measure. And secondly, why the current drive to define the transfer

rate is unfortunately turning into an effort, whether intentional or unintentional, at creating a single success measure. And finally, I would like to suggest several considerations, alterations or caveats to the transfer rate definitions which might put such a rate in the more appropriate context of one measure, among an array of multiple measures of effectiveness.

The natural tendency to use the transfer rate as a single success measure arises both from convenience and its historical linkage to community college's first, most traditional, and most understood mission.

Let us consider first, journalists, who prefer the convenience of communicating clearly and simply with a "shorthand" measure of success. Educational media writers tend to conceptualize colleges as degree-producing organizations. Perhaps because of their own higher educational experiences, this understanding of "college" is very familiar to the national media. Degrees represent a "successful" product and a clear, definable outcome for a college.

The degree most closely associated with "college" is, of course, the baccalaureate degree. Since community colleges don't grant this degree, educational writers have gravitated to the use of a supplemental "proxy" yardstick, the transfer rate, which establishes a link between the B.A. degree and community colleges. With the media's perception of "college" and the B.A. degree highly interconnected, "success" at the community college level has become dominated by emphasis on the transfer mission or programs leading to the eventual achievement of a B.A. degree.

This focus on the transfer mission is further accentuated by a rising concern over the less than desirable B.A. achievement level by minority students. This second concern of minority academic achievement underlies a considerable portion of the recent analyses of university educational researchers. While degree achievement in some career oriented, two-year programs is given lip-service as a desirable outcome by some educational researchers, many public policy researchers either ignore or denigrate the AAS degree or outcome. In such a research environment any educational outcome other than transfer, is frequently viewed unfavorably and even as a form of institutional racism or tracking of minorities.

The most positive perspective of the recent trend of educational research would suggest that perhaps educational researchers tend to understand the traditional mission of transfer best, and therefore, place the highest value upon this mission. The worst perspective on the current research would suggest that university professors either misunderstand, ignore or deny, the importance of any other mission other than transfer for community colleges.

No matter which perspective you adopt, and the truth probably lies in some combination, the research community's focus along with the national media attention on the community college transfer mission has, therefore, catapulted the debate over the proper definition of "the transfer rate" into the critical communication issue impacting the nation's perception of community colleges and their effectiveness. Anyone interested in the nation's perception of community college effectiveness, therefore, must not ignore this discussion, but wade into the discussion, and make your voice heard. To date I would say this has not been the case, and the momentum is clearly on the side of those urging a single success measure--not withstanding this consortium's, and the AACJC's policy statement.

The critics and defenders of community college effectiveness regarding transfer do agree that a number of interrelated issues are involved, including program and course articulation, advising, the "college readiness" of students, and the comparability of the classroom experience among others. Despite this complexity however, or perhaps because of it, the transfer rate, is used as a shorthand summary measurement evaluating the overall impact of all of these components of the community college student experience. In the most simple terms the question involves what students should be put into the numerator and denominator of any "transfer rate." Who should we count.

The transfer rate includes in the numerator those who transferred, while the denominator contains the potential group who could transfer.

Based upon different numerators and denominators, Arthur Cohen has demonstrated that it is possible to develop transfer rates ranging from 5% to 84%.

The low 5% rate is calculated by dividing the number of transferring students by the total community college enrollment, while the very high 84% rate divides the transferees, by the number of community college students who both intended on transferring and received an associates degree. While these two rates may express extremes of inclusion and exclusion, an inconsistent pattern of transfer rate definitions is characteristic of academic based studies as well as journalistic reports on this topic. In fact, it is this frustration with many inconsistent rates, which has led to the national appeal among community college leaders of adopting a single, accepted definition.

Why does the transfer rate definition matter? If the transfer rate is only seen as an arithmetic measurement recording geographic movement between two sectors of higher education, any rate might do. However, it is precisely when the rate is used as a measurement of effectiveness, that careful consideration must taken to assure that the assessment indicator is a fair portrayal of the transfer activity and the impact of a community college.

The fact that such a measure of effectiveness can be used, both for internal institutional review, but also for comparative public accountability to legislative bodies, has led to a major debate of how such a rate should be defined. In fact it is the latter use, in the public policy arena, which triggers most of the discussion and concern over how the rate is calculated and the data publicized.

Some Community College leaders, perhaps in a democratic spirit that emphasizes individual choice of institutional mission, have suggested that the transfer rate should not be used to evaluate comparative effectiveness of institutions. Arthur Cohen, a major advocate of one of the emerging definitions of transfer, argues, quote--"Colleges must also stop thinking of the transfer rate as a measure of success." Judith Eaton, who heads up a Ford Foundation project to improve transfer suggests that quote --"for some community colleges, limited transfer activity is appropriate.... `how much transfer' is an institutional decision." The above statements, I think, most of us would agree, are pure poppycock. Despite the suggestion made by Cohen that, quote--"a transfer rate is not good or bad," and that comparisons between institutions or groups of institutions are--quote "not useful," such comparison can and will be made. As James Palmer

clearly has warned,--quote "the possibility that rates will be used inappropriately to rank colleges cannot be discounted.(Palmer, 1991)." In fact, that statement may well be the understatement of the century on this topic. You can count on it.

It is precisely because such comparative rankings are inevitable with colleges compared against national or state-wide averages that those interested in public policy implications have approached the adoption of a definition with appropriate caution.

There can be no question that community college effectiveness will be evaluated on how well it carries out the transfer function. A strong commitment to transfer can be found in virtually every community college mission statement. It seems altogether appropriate, therefore, that effectiveness in achieving this mission should be examined using a quantitative measure, a transfer rate. Moreover, while there may be some variation among institutional mission, comparative analysis is both natural and appropriate. The question is not whether the transfer rate is an appropriate measure of effectiveness, but whether the rate can be placed in the broader context, of a series of measures of institutional effectiveness.

Two major initiatives are underway to develop a nationally accepted definition of transfer rate. The National Effective Transfer Consortium (NETC) involving a group of over thirty colleges have engaged a national consulting firm to study transfer practices and assist in defining a new transfer rate. The UCLA Center for the Study of Community Colleges has received funding from the Ford Foundation for a comparable project. The AACJC and national association of state community college directors have taken a "wait and see" attitude toward these projects and their respective definitions. There has been, however, an movement by AACJC toward the definition fathered by Arthur Cohen. In January of this year, the AACJC press published a research monograph using Arthur Cohen's UCLA definition. In fact it was sent out with a very complementary letter by the AACJC president David Pierce which stated-quote--"This reports brings two-year colleges a step closer to answering the long-asked question, How many students transfer to four-year college." That statement comes all too close, in my opinion, to endorsement of the Cohen definition.

Those interested in measures of effectiveness need to look closely at both proposed definitions. No endorsement of either definition in the current form is yet appropriate.

A review is warranted not because the transfer rate number derived from either calculation is that different. Both calculations have led to a rate in the mid-20% range with the NETC at 25%, and UCLA rate at 23.6%. The review is important because these two definitions represent separate "schools of thought" on how the transfer outcome at community colleges should be evaluated and effectiveness determined. Both definitions also contain serious philosophical problems that need greater discussion at this stage and not a quick move toward endorsement.

Each of the two "schools" examine whether the transfer outcome has been achieved for a defined group of students, either of those who entered at the same time, the so-called, "entering cohort" or those who left at the same time, an "exiting cohort." The "Cohen School" focuses on an entering fall class of community college students and whether they eventually transfer to a four-year college, that is, within four years. The "NETC school" focuses upon an exiting cohort of students (non-returners from a spring semester) and follows up to determine if those students "leaving" a community college show up the next fall at a university. Those interested in the institutional effectiveness movement within community colleges need to evaluate whether the assumptions of either calculation are appropriate.

Each definitional "school" does qualify who is represented in the potential pool of students, considered as the denominator. Both groups require a minimum number of hours of college-level work to be included in the cohort. The theory behind a minimum hour requirement suggests that the community college should count in the cohort, only a student the college could have a educational impact upon, through "meaningful classroom experience" at the collegiate level. The "Cohen school" considers this minimum meaningful experience to be 12 hours. The "NETC school" minimum would require at least 9 hours (actually 6 hours, plus reregistration for at least 3 more hours).

If the transfer rate is an outcome measure which is considered a measure of institutional effectiveness, the minimum hour requirement is important. Without such a minimum there can be

no possible presumption of "value added." Without a minimum threshold of hours, the transfer rate only measures a physical geographical activity of movement between two separated campuses. If "transfer" is a outcome measure, however, then some educational impact of the originating institution must be considered. Whether what amounts to three or four courses is sufficient classroom impact to represent a base to measure this outcome deserves some discussion. Should Community college effectiveness be measured by the student that only passed through our campuses for what represents perhaps barely one semester or less. Several national studies, those, for example of Grubb, 1991) and Adelman (1992) support exclusion from any cohort of those labeled as either "occasional" or "experimenting." These studies seem to have adopted the 12 credit hour threshold. Therefore, the first question we must answer, is whether, we accept the 12 hour threshold, or believe a higher threshold, such as 18 or 24 hours is more relevant to assure a value-added measurement.

The qualification that the student's minimum threshold of hours be at the collegiate level generally has been taken to exclude remedial work. In fact, both definitional "schools" have excluded remedial credit hours from the calculation. This qualification would seem to make sense. It is interesting to note. however, that the recent Adelman longitudinal study of the class of 1972 included remedial credits in his calculations at 12 hours. This had a tendency to lower the transfer rates identified in the study. If one is to include pre-collegiate level instruction, why not also GED or literacy credit hours, if the mission also involves these activities. Obviously, that would be inappropriate.

No further refinement of the specific nature of the credit hours taken beyond remedial exclusion, however, is contained in either the NETC or Cohen definition. In particular, neither definition suggests that the curricular content of the courses, especially whether they were academic or vocational, should be taken into account in considering the cohort make-up.

Both the NETC and UCLA "schools" have down-played the importance of curricular purpose, yet the intended or designed purpose of the curriculum clearly impacts the ability of students to transfer and also their desire or intent to transfer.

Students enrolled in career vocational courses contained as part of a program leading to an Associates of Applied Sciences or AAS degree are engaged a learning effort with a different curricular intent than those seeking an Associates of Arts or Sciences degree. Simply put, they take different courses for a reason. This difference in the learning environment specifically impacts the transfer rate by design. An analysis by Norton Grubb (1991) of the national longitudinal studies of both the class of 1972 and 1980 found considerable difference in transfer activity when Career vocational students were separated out from "academic" students. Academic students averaged a transfer rate approximately 9% higher than the total group including vocational students. Coupled with excluding "experimenting students of under 12 hours, a transfer rate of 33.7% rather than 24.7% is identified by Grubb. The "Cohen School" definition, so qualified, could expect a similar rate since it is closely patterned after the Grubb design. A recent study in Illinois (1992) found a 33% transfer rate for baccalaureate students and only a 11% rate for vocational program students.

Empirical research, therefore, demonstrates that occupational course enrollees contribute some transfers, but that such transfers are not the norm from curricula not designed to transfer. Cohen argues for inclusion of occupational students since they contribute--quote "many graduates." I would suggest that since this group contributes a statistically significant lower rate of transfer, it should be excluded from the main definition and be considered for inclusion perhaps in a secondary, supplemental definition. We need not be apologetic about this exclusion, if we believe that curricular design means anything at all. There can be no other conclusion than that the comprehensive inclusion of all occupational course enrollees in a general effectiveness measure for transfer will depress the transfer rate, and confound attempts to measure and communicate transfer effectiveness.

In particular, any such measure that includes career vocational students in the pool of potential transferees (the denominator) involves students who could more appropriately measured by another outcome measure. That is to say, that at a bare minimum, the inclusion of occupational students in the denominator of potential university transferees, represents a double-count of the pool which would be included in a measure involving job entry or placement from vocational

programs. Such an over-inclusion in the transfer rate has a tendency to communicate a devalued status for the job preparation mission of a community college to the general public. It may also make more difficult the development and acceptance of a separate effectiveness measure for occupational student enrollees which can be clearly understood by the general public.

The inclusion of occupational enrollees in the transfer rate equation also does not make common sense to the public. Rather than assisting the communication of an understandable number, including students enrolled in welding or construction technology in any potential equation on transfer is confusing. The media understands why welding students should not be considered in the denominator of the transfer rate. In fact even the highly suspect methodology of Chicago Sun-times article on transfer included only "pre-baccalaureate" course enrollees. With the strong possibility that any rate promises to be widely utilized both by the general public and media in evaluating community colleges, any definition must be able to communicate clearly rather than attempt to cover every conceivable possibility of transfer. For these reasons, career vocational students should be excluded from the main or principle definition of the transfer rate.

The inclusion of occupational students in the transfer measure is to succumb to the siren call of communicating with a single success measure, when multiple measures of success may be more appropriate.

The fundamental difference between the two "schools" involves the use of "entering" versus "exiting" cohorts. From the point of view of ease of data identification, both approaches seem equally obtainable from data bases. That is, to determine who entered in a particular Fall and earned twelve college-level credits at an institution, would appear just as easy to identify, as those who left and did not return but had earned some number of college-level credits. Computer tapes of either cohort would be of equal ease, or difficulty to exchange with universities.

Determining whether either cohort approach has any advantage or disadvantage, requires that some analysis be done of what exactly, each indicator is actually measuring. The entering cohort measure has the advantage and disadvantage of being both a measure of transfer activity, but also a measure of persistence of an original cohort. The entering cohort measure combines a

measurement of "program completion" with the transfer measurement activity. The new federal right to know legislation, asks colleges to report on program completion of an entering cohort within a 150% of normal full-time attendance. For associate degree completion, the federal standards have imposed a three-year completion period. The "entering cohort" approach imposes an indirect standard of four-years for the "program accomplishment" of transferring.

The Cohen four year transfer standard, therefore, may be must fully met by full-time or near full-time students or those transferring before completion of the associates degree. That is to say, part-time students who expect to transfer as a junior, (that is, sixty hours) to a four year college may have difficulty in achieving this objective within the four-year time. The average time period among community college students is closer to six than four years to achieve an associates degree or junior standing. Part-timers who transfer with far less than the number of hours needed for junior standing, therefore, will have a greater likelihood to be represented in the numerator of transferees. The Cohen measure of transfer would therefore be enhanced if a longer time period was permitted for the measurement. The NETC study found 12% transfers took five years and another 13% of transfers took between 5 and 10 years to transfer. Currently, therefore, the Cohen measure appears to be biased against non-traditional students who stop-in and out.

The Cohen measure closely resembles many national research studies which start with an entering cohort to determine educational achievement within a certain time-period. Yet, it does not compare well with the standard utilized as the "college-going" rate for high schools. Such rates do not place in the denominator all entering high school freshman of that graduating class, but only the graduating seniors of that class, a leaving cohort. In this regard, the NETC is more comparable to the "college-going" rate used to evaluate high schools effectiveness in college preparation. The NETC focus is on those leaving the community college which is comparable to focusing on graduating seniors leaving high school.

The NETC exiting cohort transfer definition, however, also is premised upon certain assumptions that contain confounding elements to the accurate measuring of the transfer activity. The NETC definition assumes a student's immediate continuity from Spring attendance at a

community college to the Fall term enrollment at a university. This lack of interruption in student flow may well presume a pattern that is inconsistent with the high percentage of part-time students. Moreover, since most four year college admissions deadlines occur in January of any spring term, it is highly probably that many students who leave in May or June will already have missed the deadline to complete an application to transfer. Therefore, the NETC tends to undercount the transfer population by placing an expectation upon its cohort, of immediate continuity, that may be impossible to be met. The NETC exiting cohort transfer definition would therefore be enhanced by measuring transfer movement occurring by the Fall following one year after leaving the community college, rather than only 4 months after leaving. An argument could also be made for a second measurement following a longer time-period gap. This would allow even further transfer movement between sectors that could occur from an "exiting cohort." A second transfer follow-up measurement, two years after leaving, should capture virtually all substantial transfer activity that is possible or likely. The exiting cohort, in contrast to the entry cohort approach makes no assumption of persistence within a time-period for inclusion. The exiting cohort calculation allows, therefore, more flexibility in attendance patterns by the student to become eligible to be considered as a transfer. The exiting cohort analysis is aimed only at answering "what happened to people who left here last spring." It is a pure outcome measure with no forced attendance pattern to qualify for inclusion in the definition.

While classifying students by curricular intent could be viewed as a general proxy for student intent, both national initiatives differ with this approach. The "Cohen School" rejects student "intent" as a factor in any transfer calculation because of the likelihood of changing opinions by students from the point of initial entry along with a concern over the ability to accurately gather such data. The "NETC school" excludes student intent from the basic transter rate, but creates an alternative rate known as a "transfer effectiveness" rate which is based upon direct student response data concerning the "importance" they placed on transfer on a scale of 1 to 5. An average "transfer effectiveness" rate of 66% was established when non-returning "leavers"

who transferred, were divided by a denominator that contained all leavers who stated that transferring was quote--"important."

The determination of student intent has been accomplished in many states by means other through survey data. Within Illinois it is one of the required data elements on the registration form which must be reported to the state board. While the accuracy of this data could be improved, research in Illinois has demonstrated that higher transfer rates occur for those who indicate an intention to transfer than for those who do not so indicate. Using the entering cohort of 1986 Illinois community college students with 12 plus, non-remedial hours, 41.6% were found to be transfer students, if they were enrolled in baccalaureate courses and indicated an intent to transfer. This contrasts with 32.6 transfer rate for all those enrolled in baccalaureate courses or a 11.6% transfer rate for those enrolled in occupational courses. In fact, only 8.8% of those in occupational courses indicate a desire to transfer.

Whether educational intent should be a variable in the transfer rate definition, therefore, deserves discussion and not simply defined out of the rate. There can be no doubt, however, that the transfer rate outcome is effected by inclusion or exclusion of intent. This discussion goes back to the original question posed in this presentation of whether community colleges have, or do not have, a high percentage of "successful leavers" with outcomes fulfilling their objectives.

Because of the varying ability of individual state to gather such data and potential differences in methodology to determine intent, however, a consideration of the use of intent data may well argue for use in a secondary rather than primary definition. In conclusion, the current debate finds both contending definitions "wanting" on a number of points. The consortium and others concerned about measuring community college effectiveness need to become involved in this debate. For purposes of facilitating the debate, I would propose the following—

1. Multiple transfer rates be considered with perhaps one primary rate and several secondary measures.

2. The primary rate should be a pure outcome measure utilizing an exiting cohort with the measurement taking place one year after the fall following a student's leaving the community college

3. The entering cohort measurement be considered as a secondary rate, with a longer time-period used than the Cohen measurement, such as five or six years.

4. The transfer rate numerator and denominator contain those students obtained 16 or more hours of baccalaureate course credits only. For a liberal arts transfer this could, for example include two English classes, two humanities or social sciences and either a math or science course.

5. The transfer rate of vocational students should be reported separately.

6. Student intent along with curriculum differentiation in the transfer rate would be desirable for those states with the capacity to measure this information, but this rate should be considered secondary to the rate differentiating by curriculum unless a standard methodology of measuring intent is also agreed upon and nationally carried out.

7. The consortium should go on record opposing any early adoption of a transfer rate.

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